

generation anxiety?; Rising income inequality. Bitter political polarization. Precarious work. And a rapid warming planet. For those who came of age in the decade, and more insidious crisis is taking hold - and they can't escape it

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Body

As the second decade of the 21st century draws to a close, we look at the big trends that emerged - and how they will continue to affect the way we live.

"Oh ... I'm terrified."

Isabela Rittinger hasn't even graduated from high school yet. She dreams of one day becoming a politician. But right now her occupation reads: climate activist.

At 17, she's already plagued with anxieties about what lies ahead in her future, and more broadly, her generation's. One moment she's brimming with optimism about saving the world. The next she's wracked with an existential dread about what lies ahead for her and her post-millennial class.

"I'm kind of at the start line," she said. Thinking about what's next? "It's just discouraging."

And Rittinger isn't wrong. While anxiety has always been around, the new norms of contemporary society - issues like the climate crisis, political divisiveness, precarious work and general unaffordability - have created a generation that's supercharged with anxieties, where young people feel they'll be mortgaging off their quality of life to an unforeseeable deadline in exchange for just barely keeping their heads above water.

"The outlook of me going into university, and then thinking about what will follow is kind of ... not very exciting and pretty scary."

Rittinger is also keenly aware of the fact her generation, the one that unofficially straddles the years preceding and following the millennium, stands out uniquely from the ones that came before her.

Rittinger is part of a growing body of young people in Canada, and around the world, who are increasingly more anxious than the generations before them. The most recent data, from a 2017 CAMH survey on Ontario student drug use and health, found the percentage of students between Grades 7 and 12 reporting symptoms of anxiety and depression had jumped by 15 per cent since 2013.

This is the generation known technically as Gen Z. It just as easily could be called Generation Anxiety. Individuals who have grown up alongside the internet and have never known a world without smartphones, many of them born in the same years as the social media age's founding fathers: Facebook, 2004; YouTube, 2005; Twitter, 2006.

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And it's no longer just the Big Three. The attention those giants used to hold has been usurped at warp speed by apps like Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok, which gobble up what scarce attention remains of this desperately distracted generation. Endless scrolls and an ever-present, triggering, red circle tucked into the corners of six or more apps sends young hands frantically reaching with Pavlovian urgency just to check: who liked, commented, shared or unfollowed.

It's not surprising to learn then that technology is perhaps the first and most obvious difference that many point to as causing this great anxiety leap. Laurel Johnson, a GTA-based child psychologist, confirms that the majority of the parents she speaks to are most concerned about social media specifically and what effect it may have on their child's brain.

"The research shows that social media can fuel mood disorders," she said. But she cautions against removing social media from a young person's life entirely. "That would be cruel and unusual punishment."

The yin and yang effect of social media, whether it makes you feel validated or like hiding away for an eternity, is an undeniable force. Young people remain plugged-in regardless. A recent survey from the HopeLab confirmed that teens with mood disorders are more likely to have more intense responses to social media. Positive feedback (a like or a follow) is more fulfilling for them, but negative feedback (a downvote or an unfollow) could be strangling.

Take Emily Blakeman. The Canadian teen, who now resides in California, is no stranger to the virulent attacks of cyberbullying. She's been told things like "you're ugly" and "you deserve to die" - still, she hasn't quit social media. During a time when her anxiety disorder peaked, she admits Instagram was quite harmful. Yet she found a positive side.

"I felt like it was the only way I could connect with people, even if they weren't connecting with me," the 17-year-old said over Skype. "I was still a part of something."

After she suffered severe episodes of depression in Grade 9, Blakeman's parents decided to send her to a charter school (a type of independently run school in the U.S.) where she would only be required to meet with her teacher twice a week for two hours.

Social media soon became the only place she could find real connections with friends from her old schools. For Blakeman, being able to connect with people but also see in real time what she was missing out on underscored the specific kind of cognitive dissonance many can relate to when engaging with these apps.

"It causes so much anxiety because you see other people your age doing these fun activities with their friends and you're like, well, why don't I have that?"

It's this constant wrestling with the smartphone in your hands, which serves both as a space for interaction and disconnection, that can be all-consuming for teens.

"It follows them everywhere," Johnson said, adding in a teen's mind, social media is their entire world.

"And when their world is tainted and toxic, for vulnerable adolescents, it just really puts them over the edge."

Anxiety is nothing new. Some of the parents of Generation Z may have also once been anxious kids themselves. But in an era fed by the topsy turvy news cycle of Twitter hot takes from politicians and bots alike, it's not surprising this generation is feeling what may have been previously dismissed as teen angst that much more.

Since anxiety disorders are "highly heritable," Johnson explained, one of the more insidious patterns she's seen developing in the last decade is the tendency for anxious parents to overprotect their children, or become, as they are now labelled, "helicopter parents."

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"Because they grew up suffering from anxiety, they don't want the same for their own kids," she said. "So what do they do? They over-protect them." Taking away obstacles or not teaching their child how to deal with failures at school can be harmful, she explained.

"Without (resiliency), they'll experience anxiety and they'll shut down in the face of adversity."

Adversity is in no short supply. Particularly for a generation that's been raised at a time when affordable housing is considered the stuff of mythmaking and your chances of even owning property seem about as likely as actually winning the lottery.

"The norm for my parents' generation was you get your degree, you put a downpayment on a house, pay your mortgage and get a stable job," Rittinger said. "But that doesn't seem realistic anymore."

Before they even enter the job market, gut-level worries over affordability and security fill the minds of tomorrow's leaders who perhaps naively thought their generation's biggest challenge was going to be cooling down the polar ice caps. In reality, it's that, plus a lot more.

This reality bites hard for Fayha Najeeb. Among so many concerns, it is the worry about career security that looms largest for the 19-year-old and her friends. In this climate, friendship networks that might normally be supportive turn hyper competitive.

"I think that's one of the things that's the most fearsome for my age," she said. "There's a lot of competition and everyone seems like they have their life together." Her feelings of being pitted against her peers are felt most intensely when she's checking out friends' Instagram posts or updates on LinkedIn. Conversations about what kinds of jobs people will be able to secure after graduation - if any - is a relentless churn between her peers.

She's studying social sciences and people will often joke: "You're gonna be unemployed after (university)."

Feelings of unworthiness when compared to their peers are not uncommon among this generation, explained Amanda Lenhart of the U.S. think tank Better Life Lab. But the knee-jerk reaction to blame social media and technology for that anxiety is not 100 per cent fair.

"Whether it's global inequality or climate change (or) your sense of your ability to have a life like your parents or have a life that's better than your parents," she explained, "it's not necessarily as obvious to young people today."

Patrick Wang, an international student from China studying economics at the University of Toronto, didn't realize he had anxiety over getting a job until the persistent headaches he'd been having morphed into a blinding migraine one evening at the library.

"It's more like the stress for myself, because I've chosen a major that's not that easy to make money," Wang said, sitting in the lobby of Robarts Library, the same place he had his first migraine.

Not ever far from his mind, or even the bench where we sit, are Uber Eats couriers and Lyft drivers courting students feverishly cramming for their finals, serving as a constant reminder of the precarious work environment they'll all be entering upon graduation. A new study from Statistics Canada showed that one in 10 Toronto workers is part of the gig economy.

"I check the Bank of Canada site every day for jobs, but there's not a lot there," Wang said. He's an A student in a highly competitive program. Still, he finds himself worried about the future.

"The feelings are strongest on my heart," he said, knitting his fingers across his chest. "It's a feeling I don't know how to explain, but it's like tight or very heavy."

Though Wang has never visited the campus health and wellness centre or a doctor to receive counselling for his stresses, many post-secondary students have. The institutions that serve these young people are feeling the

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pressure too. As reported by a Star/Ryerson investigation from 2017, on average, counselling appointments across 13 post-secondary institutions increased by 35 per cent in recent years. Post-secondary institutions, however, have not caught up with the demand.

This crunch can be most intimately experienced, Najeeb said, by the long wait times for students to receive counselling. Last year, after a traumatic incident when a friend of hers from school died by suicide, Najeeb was able to see a counsellor at U of T immediately. Later, however, when she was looking to see someone more regularly, she was put on a waitlist for five months. "And I haven't heard anything back and this is something that happens to a lot of people on campus," she said.

This issue has been brought into sharper focus on the back of a spate of highly publicized suicides on campus. It has been a wake-up call for the school administration, said Christina Khokhar, who together with Graeme Littlemore started the Mental Health Permanent Body to help raise awareness about the issue on campus.

"These issues do exist," Khokhar said. "And they need to be addressed. Otherwise, every campus and every student is in danger."

As the door closes on the decade, the generation who should be most looking forward to the next 10 years instead seems poised on the edge of a dangerous precipice. The anxiety Gen Z-ers are experiencing is not unfounded and, as many would agree, requires more action on a large, national scale. But some governments are heading in the opposite direction. Last year, Doug Ford's Progressive Conservative government reduced planned annual funding to mental health programs by \$335 million.

"To me, all those data points line up. What the story we should read from that is that we have completely insufficient services for kids. It's a crisis," said Kim Moran, CEO of Children's Mental Health Ontario. "And we are failing, have failed and are continuing to fail a whole generation of children."

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